Coyote in the Mountains and Other Stories

Earl Ganz
Technical problems do abound in the novel. Longsen tells his tale in English with the stylistic skill of a proficient American high school graduate. The novel is unbalanced on a personal level. In the opening of the novel we see how, in this very different culture, Longsen wooed Shalin, his wife to be. But after experiencing this courtship, the relationship between the two is hardly touched on. Instead, Longsen dwells on his relationship with his friends, the people in the courtyard and the people at the Bureau, laying the groundwork for his political problems. Well into the novel we get hints that Longsen and Shalin’s marriage is not happy. It is almost as if Zongren is not afraid to attack China’s politics but will not break some cultural rule that forbids him to talk about what goes on between a man and his wife. When Shalin, much later in the book, causes Longsen to be sent to prison due to her political blindness, we wonder how two people could be together for so long and not put together a mutual plan for survival in such dangerous times. In prison Longsen tells Shalin not to visit because the trip is too long. He then spends three years without her. When Longsen gets out of prison, he goes back to Shalin, leaving the reader to wonder why.

Aside from the story of how Longsen met Shalin, much of the novel does not hang together as a "story." It abounds in episodic vignettes on what happened at the Bureau, what happened to the neighbors, strung together like bits of gossip. But Zongren does paint a brilliant portrait of a culture so different from ours that it will keep you turning the pages. And at times, despite his simplistic prose, he manages many insights into that culture that are positively inspired.

David Curran

_Coyote in the Mountains and Other Stories_
by John Rember

If you had asked me if it was possible to write fables of modern American society using, as your central character, an animal whose tales were already specific to another culture, I would have said you were nuts. Why strap yourself like that?
And to the coyote? On the one hand the Native American tales are so good. On the other, Hollywood’s taken the character. What do you need it for? It’s been done.

But not like John Rember has done it in this lovely book, *Coyote in the Mountains*, Limberlost Press, 1989. The stories are magic, doing all the things fables are called on to do: illustrating human foibles, explaining how things got that way and warning us that if things keep happening as they are, they could get worse. But Coyote stories are also fables about a specific animal character, the trickster, the one who’s always using his brain for advantage.

"A Few Beers and a Road Trip," introduces this character to us in a new guise. Restless from a long winter, Coyote is cleaning his car for a ride he feels he must take.

It was not a small task. He had avoided it until a series of warm spring days had melted the pad of ice which built up on the floorboard during the winter. Things frozen there had escaped. A rich malignant smell hung about the vehicle, a smell compounded of spilled beer, hamburger wrappers, and the disintegrating contents of doggie bags.

His friend, Badger, comes by and asks to go along. But Badger gets drunk and belligerent which is his nature and they are stopped by the police for throwing beer bottles at road signs. Coyote explains that Badger is a Vietnam vet and they are let go. Soon Coyote turns around and, on the way back, he begins to drink and throw beer bottles out the window.

In a plot summary it doesn’t sound like much. But the plot is important. All through the story Coyote has been annoyed at Badger for acting like a jerk and ruining a trip that’s supposed to chase away the winter blues. But, in the end, acting like Badger turns out to be exactly what is needed to chase the blues. Coyote wouldn’t have known this if Badger had not come along to show him how and, with the vet excuse, given him the safety to do it. Badger makes the kill, eats his fill and Coyote finishes up.

It’s the symbiotic relationship of one animal to another and of one human being to another, and it’s a theme that runs through fables of all cultures. Another theme in "A Few Beers and a Road Trip" is that of the kill. Each story contains a victory, a kill, or a loss of that kill. It’s a victory or loss that Coyote, the scavenger, partakes of, and, through Coyote, the reader, too. In "The Bright Beauty of the World," these themes come up again.
Coyote falls for Lynx, a beautiful barmaid who tells him she’s restless in her marriage and job and wants to get away.

"Restless," said Lynx. "Sometimes when I drive home after we’ve closed I just want to keep on driving. It doesn’t matter where. Just the sound of the wind and the white lines disappearing under the hood and being alone—that’s enough."

Later, drunk, Coyote asks here what she means by restless? He feels it too and wants her to go with him but she’s too tired. Yet he cannot let go of what she has suggested and so runs away without her. When he finally stops for gas several hundred miles later, he’s caught by the beautiful sunrise and calls to tell her about it. But she is only annoyed at being awakened.

It’s a lot like the story of Badger. Coyote profits from a friend’s kill. But this time the friend has killed for sport. Lynx will not eat and Coyote not only gets it all to himself but also learns that they are, after all, two very different animals with very different diets.

There are other stories about differences between animals. "Object Lesson" is the story of Otter, the romantic waitress, and her affair with Sandhill Crane, a married school teacher. Coyote goes into a cafe for breakfast and Otter tells him she and Sandhill Crane are going to Alaska. Coyote is offended for he knows Sandhill Crane’s wife and children and scolds Otter. Just then Sandhill Crane comes in and tells Coyote how happy he is and how beautiful his future with Otter will be. But when he and Coyote are alone, he confesses that he’s also doing it because he’s afraid of growing old. He leaves and Coyote asks Otter when they are going? She surprises him by saying never. She has just realized it’s over.

In "Object Lesson" Coyote seems to be a third party, the voice of reality. And all he seems to get out of the story is the realization that he must cut firewood for the coming winter. But Otter, perhaps because of Coyote’s scolding, realizes that what she wants is what she has. Romance has been her kill and she’s already eaten. She knows if she runs off with Sandhill Crane, she’ll eat no more. They’re not for each other. They are very different animals with very different eating habits. But Coyote understands her and the reader realizes by the end that it is they who are alike.

Perhaps the least successful story in the book is another Coyote-as-observer story. In "User Friendly," the tale of Loon, Coyote’s insane friend who’s turned himself into a computer, we
lose the character of Coyote. I think the original idea might have been to see Loon as already dead. Because coyotes are scavengers, Coyote would eat of his old friend who would turn out to be poisoned meat. But Coyote never eats and the story ends with a forced sentiment about loss.

But "User Friendly" is the exception that proves just how good the other stories in Coyote in the Mountains are. And it's the one that first got me thinking about why the book worked so well. How did John Rember do it? How, in this age when fables are considered an archaic folk art, good only for the broadest satire, did he have me eating out of his hand as if I were some kind of happy-go-lucky scavenger. My only criticism is that the book is too short. Writing as delicious as this makes gluttons of us all.

Earl Ganz